

New perspectives and audiences for the university collections in Amsterdam

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Abstract

Major investments and organizational restructuring have led to important changes for the collections and museums of the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. These developments, which have resulted in a rather large centralized heritage organization within the university, are presented in this article. It will be argued that by pulling resources and by closer cooperation, smaller university museums and collections could reach better results more efficiently.

Introduction

In recent times, major investments by the university have led to important changes for the academic collections in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. This article will briefly go into the history of these collections, their current situation and the planned developments for the next few years. The recent developments have led to a situation that is radically different from the crisis that most university museums are experiencing. This Dutch example may point to a possible way out of the catch-22 situation that many university collections and museums seem to find themselves in: I will argue at the end of this article that the strong tendency to focus on what sets university museums apart from other museums, and why the specifics of individual collections and museums makes close cooperation impossible, may not be very fruitful. It could be argued that by pulling resources and closer cooperation, better and more efficient results could be reached. I will use the history and context for university museums in Amsterdam and in the Netherlands as a case in point.

A short history of the university collections in Amsterdam

The origins of the collections in Amsterdam lie in the far past, in the late middle ages, when convents and monasteries built up libraries in the city of Amsterdam. In 1578, Amsterdam became protestant and all book collections from these catholic institutions were confiscated and centralized in the first public library of the city. This library became an important factor in the foundation of what was then called the *Athenaeum Illustre*, the *Famous School* in 1632, as Amsterdam did not get the right to officially found a university until 1877. When this was finally allowed, it was first a municipal university for almost a century. Since 1971 it is, as all Dutch universities, financed by national government. The University of Amsterdam is described as a general research university with about 30,000 students and 5,000 employees. At this point in time, the university has buildings all over the city, but a large scale relocation plan is underway. This will concentrate the university on four concentrated areas or campuses in the city: one for medicine, one for the natural sciences, one for the humanities and one for the gamma-disciplines, including law and psychology. The humanities faculty is the only one that will remain downtown Amsterdam. The buildings of UvA Erfgoed (University of Amsterdam Heritage Collections) are on the outside edge of this complex and they will be the most visible university facility in the city for the general public.

The first university museum in Amsterdam that can be properly called a museum dates from 1928. It was housed in the attic of the very first building that was used for the *Athenaeum Illustre* in 1632: the so-called Agnieten chapel that itself dates back to 1470. As a university museum it was closed in 2003 and the collections merged with the Special Collections of the university library. Since 2003, no new presentation on the institutional history of the university has been developed. University history does

play a small role in the program for temporary exhibitions, but decisions have to be made about its role in the future.



Fig. 1 - The combined buildings of the University's Heritage Collections downtown Amsterdam. The Allard Pierson Museum to the left and the Special Collections buildings to the right © Bettina Neumann

The Allard Pierson Museum opened its doors on its present location in 1976 after having been elsewhere in the city since 1934. In 2009 it celebrates its 75th anniversary. Although the museum has renovated some of its permanent exhibitions over the years, other parts of the museum are still as they were designed in 1976. Even though they have held up remarkably well, a renovation is

long overdue. We have started planning this and in 2010 we should have a plan that we can use to raise the necessary funds.

University collections in the Netherlands

Before 1990 university museums in general were hidden deep beneath the horizon of public awareness and government policy, with very few exceptions. But starting in 1988, the Dutch had one of the largest conservation programs ever running. It was called the *Deltaplan for the preservation of cultural heritage*.¹ Literally hundreds of millions of euro's, then guilders, were poured into museums and archives, to catch up with existing backlogs in conservation and registration of collections. In 1993, this author became one of its project managers. The Deltaplan project worked as a catalyst for a group of universities that had already been busy for some time to gain recognition for the role they were playing in safeguarding important segments of the national heritage. This with the purpose to get more funding for these efforts that were – in the eyes of many in the academic world – not part of the core business of universities, which is of course education and science. Interestingly enough, the Dutch universities, then as much as now, usually presented their collections as regular cultural heritage and not specifically or exclusively as scientific resources. Apparently they felt and feel that their *unique selling point* lays not in the scientific, but in their general cultural value. Five universities, out of the ten that exist in the Netherlands, published a number of reports about the size, problems and costs of the heritage collections and historic buildings they were maintaining. These 5 universities called themselves the 'classic universities' and they are in fact the oldest in the country.²

The managers of the Deltaplan project wanted to verify the financial claims of the universities and ordered a thorough external audit. The results were published in a book that later became the manual

¹ For a review of the Deltaplan project, see: Instituut voor Onderzoek van Overheidsuitgaven, *Beheer en Behoud in de Delta, evaluatie Deltaplan voor het cultuurbehoud*, 2000 en *De betekenis van het Deltaplan voor het Cultuurbehoud voor de rijksmusea en de rijksge subsidieerde musea, gepercipieerde resultaten en bewustwording*, Zoetermeer, 2000.

² The universities of Amsterdam, Utrecht, Leiden, Groningen and Delft. The University of Leiden being the oldest, already founded in the second half of the 16th century.

for funding conservation projects for academic collections.³ It showed convincingly that the universities were indeed holding important collections that needed support and the government provided a sum of about 11 million euro's over an 8 year period. the universities chipped in about 15 million euro's themselves. This may seem extravagant to some, but it is important to realize that culture as well as education and science are very much a public affair in the Netherlands, with the vast majority of funds being provided by national, provincial or local government. Institutions such as museums and universities receive up to as much as 90% of their income from public sources. As we are working in a very prosperous country with a vested public interest in culture, there is – in relative and absolute terms – a lot of money available.

These inventories and projects had all kinds of effects at the universities. In Amsterdam, it convinced the board of the university to develop their heritage as an asset instead of a burden. They decide to use the history and the collections to promote the university as an interesting place to study and work. Another important spin off was the new cooperation between the Dutch universities both on a level of strategy as well as between curators and other professionals in university museums. It became possible to develop common collection policies that made e.g. the exchange of collections –formerly unthinkable- a serious possibility. The Stichting Academisch Erfgoed (Foundation for Academic Heritage) functions as the vehicle for this national cooperation between university museums and collections.⁴

University collections in Amsterdam

In Amsterdam, many collections were preserved under the aforementioned Deltaplan and new facilities were created for the Special Collections of the university library adjacent to the Allard Pierson Museum, the archaeological museum of the university. In May 2007 this new venue for academic collections opened its doors.⁵ In the beginning of 2009, the organization was restructured and all collections are now part of one new, cross-university organization: the Heritage Collections of the University of Amsterdam or, in short, UvA Heritage. It is positioned as a special department of the university library. The author of this article was appointed director 1st February 2009. Are all collections part of the new organization? No, two museums are out of scope. Firstly, the Zoological Museum Amsterdam, which will move to Leiden in 2010 to merge with other Dutch natural history collections into a national research centre for biodiversity. The 'public face' of the research centre will be the national natural history museum Naturalis.⁶ And secondly there is Museum Vrolik, basically a collection of anatomical specimens and medical instruments. The academic hospital which houses this small museum, is also home to a huge art collection that is displayed in all public spaces of their building.⁷ This art collection of 6,000 works is not used as a resource for research or education.

The collections of the newly formed UvA Heritage can be divided into four categories:

- Special collections from the university library
- Institutional history of the university
- History of science
- Archaeological collections in the Allard Pierson Museum

³ Adviesgroep RBK, Om het academisch erfgoed, Rapport, opgesteld in opdracht van de Staatssecretaris van OCenW, 2006.

⁴ www.academischerfgoed.nl (accessed December 20, 2009).

⁵ I realise that many in our field are interested in more detail about the merger of library collections and museum collections. This is however not the focus of this paper. I will gladly discuss this topic at a next UMAC conference and/or publish about this in the proceedings.

⁶ For developments concerning the creation of the new Centre for Biodiversity see: www.naturalis.nl/hcb (accessed December 20, 2009).

⁷ For information on Museum Vrolik, see: www.uba.uva.nl/musea/object.cfm?objectid=948507F6-DEEE-4346-8E2EC0D8FFC6024D (accessed December 20, 2009).

Most of the collections can be found in the combined buildings of UvA Erfgoed, downtown Amsterdam, where the buildings occupy about 9,000 square meters of exhibition facilities, stores, study facilities etc. The Allard Pierson Museum has been at this location since 1976, in the former building of our national bank. In May 2007, the adjacent complex was opened for the Special Collections of the university library. There are also collections in the university library itself, which is a few hundred meters away, and in an outside storage facility on the Southern edge of the city. All in all, over 20 kilometers of shelves are used for storing the collections. Collections and objects can also be found at almost each and every university building. It is quite complicated to keep track of all these external collections, but I'll come back to that later. A special facility that we have is the so-called Artis Library, the library of the city zoo that used to also house the zoological department of the university. It is a 19th century library, of 1867 to be exact, in its original setting.



Fig. 2 - The Artis Library from 1867 © Bettina Neumann

All in all UvA Heritage has about 100 staff, permanent, temporary and voluntary, and there is a gross budget of about 7.5 million euro. This includes approximately 15% earned income, mostly for projects, such as exhibitions and digitization. UvA Heritage is a part of the university library, which defines its core business to act as a scientific information broker for all students and staff at the university. This sometimes causes friction, as some of our own library colleagues find what we do to be outside the scope of the library or – the other way around – we feel we are limited in our assignment to communicate with broader audiences outside ‘academia’.

The future of the university collections in Amsterdam

Up to now a lot of money was invested in UvA Heritage. The renovation and refurbishing of the special collections building alone cost almost 25 million euro. The motivation of the university board for this investment was the more or less general assumption that investing in the collections would enhance the

public image of the university. A thorough analysis of the costs and benefits, if possible, to prove that it was a wise decision, has not yet been made. To create focus, we are currently working on a policy paper to use for future development. Our mission statement has recently been reformulated as: “To

preserve the heritage collections of the University of Amsterdam and make them relevant for research and education, for a general audience and to contribute to the public image of the university.”

The four main long term goals are:

- We want to be an important facility for scientific work and therefore we aim for an active use of the collections for education and science, within and outside the UvA.
- We want to promote a sense of ownership of our collections and facilities for students and staff by encouraging active participation in exhibitions, events and other activities.
- We want to be an interesting and attractive heritage institution that reaches a substantial segment of our potential audiences within the university, in Amsterdam, within the Netherlands.
- We make a significant contribution to the public image of the university as an interesting place to work and study. We function as a showcase for the university and the scientific work of the university.

These general goals can be broken down into very concrete programs and projects. So, as an example, our goal “we want to be an important facility for scientific work and therefore we aim for an active use of the collections for education and science, within the UvA and for others”, can be followed up by the statement that “active use implies accessibility of collections”. Accessibility implies cataloguing, digitization, physical access, also for disabled, study and educational facilities, etc. For all of these we can and will make operational choices, such as “what to digitize for whom, in what way, at what speed and at what cost?”

In terms of priorities it is of course of foremost importance to ascertain continuity at a (financial) level that allows for proper programming of activities. There is always a limited amount of money left over once the rent and the staff have been paid and it is usually that last bit of money that allows for projects with the strongest impact: exhibitions, conservation, digitization, a new website and the like. However, these are usually the only flexible budgets there are and therefore the easiest ones to cut if budgets have to be cut.

To achieve financial stability, financiers and stakeholders need to be happy. In Amsterdam, there is basically only one really important party to look at: the board of the university who directly supplies funding. We will therefore, whatever happens, please the board. If they have visitors, we will receive them. If they want to have a party at our place, they are welcome (within the limits of our professional protocols of course!). We will go out of our way to make them happy. This implies for instance that they are always invited for any opening of an exhibition. They sit with the VIP’s that may be our guests and they get the floor if they want to get it.

Financial continuity also necessitates that funding is secured from other sources. This sometimes means that we do projects that may not be our highest priority. A good example is digitization. There are thousands of man years and millions of euros of work to do in our collections. We have collections that we think are of prime importance to digitize, but there may be no funding to do so. Other collections may be less important in our eyes, but are – for some reason or another – popular for private or public donors: we will not say no.

Continuity is also strongly supported if outside parties speak well of you to the board. So a strong focus on internal and external communication is necessary. After all, it is not enough to do good work, but it is necessary that relevant people know that you do good work. In Amsterdam, we try to involve key players from within the university. We e.g. have recently installed a ‘heritage advisory board’ of over 20 prominent scientists from the different faculties. They are high quality advisors for us and,

potentially, powerful advocates for us in the university community. We also always try to involve students and research staff in our projects or, in a recent example, we bring the collections to them.

In Amsterdam, as was mentioned earlier, the university is relocating campuses. In June 2009 the first phase of the new – huge – science faculty building has been finished. In February the faculty voiced that maybe, after all, it would be nice to do something with science collections. It was April when it was finally decided that it really was a good idea, which was of course too late to do anything properly. However, we felt it would be a great opportunity to show our potential and to impress the university community. Hard work went into it, but at the opening day there was a first exhibition that everybody was really enthusiastic about. It has gained us a lot of friends in a part of the university that was otherwise difficult to reach for us and we are now working on a follow up.



Fig. 3 - Part of the presentation of the science collections at the new science faculty
© Special Collections University of Amsterdam

The second thing that makes stakeholders happy is media presence. Television obviously has the greatest impact, but respectable newspapers and of course their science sections are also very important. In Amsterdam, we have appointed professional communications staff to achieve this. One always needs a bit of luck to be successful, but in general the media are happy to report about almost anything. That is, if you give them

interesting material. In planning our projects, we do consider the media potential and the way that activities will strengthen our profile for our different target groups.

We have defined two specific projects that are vital importance for our future. One is the collections policy plan. It is meant to give focus, to prioritize what is more important than the rest. It is necessary to decide where to invest, where to acquire, where to critically select, where to conserve, where to let go. We cannot maintain that everything is important and avoid choices. If we don't make well founded and critical decisions ourselves, others will make them for us, by cutting funding, by donating their money or collections to other institutions instead of to us or time will make selections for us. Writing up this plan is a difficult process that takes a lot of time and that involves almost all of our staff, but it is worth it. It provides an essential building block in our institutional policy and strategy.

Second vital project is the renewal of the Allard Pierson Museum. The museum also got a new director in 2009. Even though everybody was talking about the necessity for renovation in the near future, there was no plan and no money. This renewal is important for many reasons. First of all to become again an interesting museum for our target groups. Secondly because modern facilities are lacking in a number of areas and the installations need serious maintenance. It is also an opportunity to better

integrate the Special Collections and museum's facilities and potentially, it will lead to possibilities to show more of the collections in the areas of university history and the history of science.

Cooperation as an instrument for strategy and efficiency for university museums

So much for the situation in Amsterdam. At the UMAC conference 2009 in Berkeley, where I presented this paper, I was surprised to find a strong tendency amongst participants to focus on what sets university museums apart from other museums. The lack of understanding about this uniqueness – with administrators and the outside world at large – seems to be conceived as a major cause for the problems that many university museums and collections face. It also seems as if the uniqueness of individual collections and museums makes close cooperation between them impossible, even on a single campus or within a single university. To me that was surprising, even though I am not new to ICOM or to the museum community. But I am new to the UMAC committee and to the international specifics of university museums. This may be the reason why – up to now – I have always considered university museums to be first and foremost museums, like all others.

I would like to argue here that the focus on uniqueness and individuality may not be very fruitful. It must be noted that many university museums are very small, understaffed and underfunded. At the same time, the highly motivated professionals and volunteers that run these museums and collections try to offer a full range of activities to university staff and students, to local communities and to the general public. It could be argued that by pulling resources and closer cooperation better and more efficient results could be reached.

The history and context for university museums in the Netherlands, especially the situation in Amsterdam, may serve as a case in point. Of course, the Netherlands is a small country which makes cooperation, in practical terms, easier. And a single university, in a compact city such as Amsterdam, is a manageable entity. However, until recently there wasn't a lot of cooperation in the Netherlands either. And even on the small scale of the University of Amsterdam, it was inconceivable that faculties would allow a central facility such as UvA Heritage to guide and coordinate the historical or scientific collections. There was a much stronger focus on what sets thing apart than on what they have in common.

It is not necessarily a natural inclination of the Dutch to centralize what can also be done individually. However, we have learned that some challenges are better met as a group than as individuals, especially if the individual group members each have limited resources. This approach may take getting used to in places, such as in the United States, where competition is often promoted as the system to bring out excellence. This may be right, I am not arguing basic political philosophy, but it usually also means that besides winners there's collections that lose. And the winning museums do not necessarily keep the most important collections or have the most meaningful activities. It often means first and foremost that they're best at fundraising. It also means that understaffed and underfunded museums have to allocate precious time and resources to compete with their colleagues. It could be argued that if museums work together as a group e.g. in fundraising for shared purposes, they do not compete amongst themselves but only with other sectors. And because they share resources, they can afford a more professional level of fundraising which should lead to more success sooner or later. The same goes e.g. for outreach or educational activities. In many places all museums and academic collections are more or less reaching out to the same target groups in the same geographical areas with similar aims. It could again be argued that coordinating or pulling resources could raise efficiency.

The combination of a focus on uniqueness and individuality and a system of competition, may be exactly the reason why so many university museums and academic collections are underfunded and

understaffed and it may be asked what purpose is served in this way. During the conference, it was also argued that collections are best kept at the departments where they were formed. This is probably true in terms of the knowledge about and in that the use of collections is often related to the original field of science or institutional context where collections were formed. This does however not mean that the best level of organization is locally. In reality this organizational principle often means that for each of the different collections there is only one single specialist in the relevant branch of science responsible for keeping a collection. He or she has to do everything. In this way it is impossible or very difficult to organize necessary specialist knowledge such as on conservation, PR, fundraising, education etc. Again, the question should be asked what goals are achieved in this way. It is of course of vital importance that scientific knowledge about collections should be connected to them, but this doesn't mean that in terms of organization those knowledgeable scientists should bare the full load of museological responsibility. They are often not qualified to perform all museum tasks, which means that the care for the collections may be suboptimal.

It may seem easy to argue in this way given the budgets and staff numbers we have in our new heritage organization in Amsterdam. And yes, we are in a relatively luxury position. I am sure though that if all local and central costs as they were in the past are added together, it may show a budget that is not that far away from our current central budget for keeping the university's collections. And for that we get a far more professional level of collections care, of PR and marketing, of scientific and educational facilities, of exhibitions and events and a higher profile with our stakeholders. I dare not say if this would be the best approach for any given situation. I do know that it does work in The Netherlands and it does work in Amsterdam.

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